

The Arab perception of Israel's military is that it is almost invincible. This conviction feeds conspiracy theories about Jewish superiority, but at the same time serves as an excuse for its own failures. Something the Arab public is often unaware of: Their own regimes that publicly demonize Israel seek its protection behind closed doors – and buy its weapons.

By Mohamed Diwan

The defeat in the 1967 war – known in Arabic as *al-Naksa* (the setback) or *al-Hazima* (the defeat) – is still perceived as a deep narcissistic wound in the Arab world today. The speed and totality of the defeat – six days in which three Arab armies were crushed by the much smaller Israel – shook the Arab self-image to its very foundations.

The Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm was one of the first Arab intellectuals to openly name this wound. In his groundbreaking work *Al-Naqd al-Dhati Ba'd al-Hazima* (Self-Criticism after Defeat, 1968), he argued that the Arabs should not look for blame in external conspiracies, military betrayal or Israeli superiority, but in themselves. Al-Azm called for relentless self-criticism: Arab societies would have to embrace secularism, gender equality, democracy and science in order to achieve progress. He was arrested and put on trial for his radical theses and criticism of Islam.

The Islamist writer Muhammad Galal Kishk interpreted the defeat in religious terms: Israel had not won because of military superiority, but because it possessed something that the Arabs lacked – the certainty and clarity of religious devotion. This interpretation – however analytically flawed it may be – became the ideological foundation of political Islam: the return to religion as the only way to restore Arab strength.

For the Arab world, as the Washington Institute put it, the defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War was the open wound from which the Arab world never recovered. The refusal to engage in institutional self-criticism led to pan-Arabism and Nasserism being supplanted over time by the rise of Islamism – an ideology that became a threat to the Arab order itself.

Obsession with power and the inability to generate it

“It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to lay its law on all

nations and to spread its power over the entire planet." This sentence from Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, says everything to understand the significance of the failure against Israel for the Arab world. Not because the sentence is true – it is not – but because it reveals the pathology that has defined Arab foreign policy since 1948: an obsession with power combined with a systematic inability to generate power. The Arab/Islamic world dreams of global dominance and reliably produces defeats in the process. It fantasizes about the caliphate and loses every war it wages.

In 1948, five Arab armies attacked a state that was one day old, made up of Holocaust survivors and kibbutz farmers – and they lost the war against it. In 1967, Egypt, Syria and Jordan mobilized their entire military power against Israel – and lost so completely in six days that the Arab world is still traumatized by it today. The casualty rate was 25:1 – twenty-five dead Arabs for every dead Israeli.

The conventional explanation is that Israel had better weapons, Western support, American money. This explanation is convenient – and it is wrong. Saudi Arabia spent an estimated \$75.8 billion on defense in 2024 – about three times Israel's defense budget before the Gaza war. It is the fifth largest military spender in the world, yet was unable to defeat a rebel militia in Yemen. After a decade and an estimated 72 million dollars a day in war costs, Riyadh sought a way out in 2023 via a Chinese-brokered rapprochement with Iran, the sponsor of the Houthis.

### The pathology of a military culture

Kenneth Pollack spent years at the CIA and the US National Security Council studying Arab armies. His findings, set out in "Armies of Sand", are damning and politically incorrect enough to be shunned in academic circles. It is that culture is the main reason why the Arab military is ineffective. Not technology. Not resources. Not Soviet doctrine. Culture!

What Pollack means by this is that Arab officers hoard information like a power resource – they do not share it with subordinates or neighboring units, even if lives depend on it. Arab NCOs do not take initiative – they wait for explicit orders, even if the tactical situation requires immediate action. Arab armies do not analyze mistakes – they look for scapegoats. After every defeat, traitors are identified, conspiracies are uncovered, the West and the Jews are blamed. What never happens: honest self-criticism.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War illustrates this pattern impressively. In the “Valley of Tears” on the Golan Heights, around 1,400 Syrian tanks attacked two Israeli brigades with only 170 tanks – under ideal conditions: strategic surprise, overwhelming numerical superiority, a simultaneous two-front war. But as Pollack documents, the Syrian units did not seek alternative axes of attack when they encountered resistance and did not secure their flanks. They rolled forward rigidly according to plan, unable to adapt to the tactical situation. After four days, they withdrew, leaving behind hundreds of destroyed tanks.

In Western armies, the ability that these Syrian officers did not show is called: order tactics. This refers to the independent implementation of orders by subordinates who understand the objective and adapt their means to the situation. In Arab armies, mission tactics are a career risk. Those who show initiative make themselves suspect. Those who follow orders to the letter are excused, even if they fail.

### Weak armies as a survival strategy

But culture alone does not explain the entire failure of the Arab military. We need to understand why Arab regimes deliberately keep their armies weak. The answer lies in a dynamic that political scientists call “coup-proofing” – and it is as cynical as it sounds.

Between 1948 and 1969, the Arab world experienced an epidemic of military coups. Syria alone suffered three coups in 1949, Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, Yemen in 1962, Algeria in 1965 and Libya in 1969. The kings who survived – in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco – drew a radical conclusion from this: a strong army is more dangerous for one's own regime than for the enemy. It is better to have a weak army that cannot carry out a coup than a strong army that overthrows the royal house.

The methods of coup-proofing are manifold and all toxic for military effectiveness: command structures are fragmented so that no general accumulates enough power to stage a coup. Parallel security apparatuses – secret services, presidential guards, tribal militias – monitor the regular army. Officers are not promoted because they are competent, but because they are loyal. In Syria under Assad, the officer class was filled with Alawites – a religious minority whose survival was tied to the regime. In Saudi Arabia, command positions are filled by princes whose only qualification is their bloodline.

The result of such policies is an army that functions as an instrument of oppression against its own population internally, but fails externally. Arab armies are police apparatuses with tanks. They can crush demonstrators and bombard cities. What they cannot do is defeat an organized enemy on the battlefield.

### The secret alliance with the enemy

The most interesting twist in this story is the one that no one talks about because it would bring down the whole facade. The same Arab regimes that publicly condemn Israel as a cancer, a murderer of children, an existential threat to Islam, are privately cooperating with Israel against Iran.

The Abraham Accords of 2020 made public what intelligence agencies had known for years: Israel and the Gulf states are conducting joint operations, sharing intelligence, coordinating their strategies against Tehran. Israeli fighter jets use Saudi airspace. Emirati officers train with Israeli instructors. Morocco buys Israeli drones for two billion dollars. The security cooperation between Israel and the Arab monarchies is closer than that between the Arab states themselves.

The irony behind this story is breathtaking: the Arab regimes, which legitimize themselves largely through their fight against Zionism, need the Zionist state to protect them from Iran. For reasons of internal politics, they have kept their armies so weak that they are no longer able to defend themselves. That is why Israel is now the only regional power that can counter Iran's claims to hegemony. The Arab world thus finds itself in the absurd position of publicly condemning Israel and needing the same Israel for its own security. And at the same time being incapable of resolving this contradiction.

The Gaza war since October 2023 has put this hypocrisy to the test. The Arab street is raging. Social media is flooded with images from Gaza. And what did the Abraham Accords states do? None terminated the agreements. Bahrain did withdraw its ambassador from Israel, but this was a symbolic gesture. The UAE criticized Israel at the UN, but continued to exchange intelligence with it. Security cooperation remained intact. And in 2024, Israeli arms exports to the Abraham Accords states rose from 3% to 12% of the total volume.

### Culture is not a genetically determined destiny

It would be convenient, but intellectually wrong, to dismiss this analysis of Arab

failure as racist. Pollackt also emphasizes that cultural patterns are not genetically determined. The crucial question is why the structures, armies and ideologies of the Arab states are so weak. The answer lies in a combination of cultural patterns that punish initiative, institutional arrangements that sacrifice competence in favor of loyalty, and an ideology that blames external enemies for internal dysfunctions.

Israel, on the other hand, represents the opposite: a culture of decentralized decision-making in which non-commissioned officers take initiative and are rewarded for it. An army that systematically analyzes mistakes and learns from defeats – the 1973 Yom Kippur War led to painful self-criticism, not conspiracy theories.

These differences not only have an impact on military strength, but also on economic strength. The Global Innovation Index ranks Israel 15th worldwide and 1st in its region. Israel leads in university-industry research cooperation, venture capital deals and patent applications. The Israeli defense industry – Rafael, Elbit, IAI – produces systems that are purchased by European armies and the USA. Germany, for example, acquired Arrow 3, a system that intercepts missiles outside the earth's atmosphere.

### In the trap of your own propaganda

The Arab perception of Israeli superiority therefore reflects a reality that is the fault of Arab culture and ideology itself. The Muslim Brotherhood's obsession with "arm yourselves for them with all your might" produced not power, but powerlessness. The wars against Israel consumed resources in Arab countries that would otherwise have been available for institutional reform and education.

After seven decades of this dynamic, the Arab world now finds itself in a position that its ideology did not foresee: dependent on Israel for its own security, but unable to admit this dependence. Trapped in a rhetoric of hatred that is "necessary" domestically but strategically counterproductive.

The Abraham Accords are an attempt to manage this contradiction politically by pretending that Israel has suddenly become acceptable. But this message is only relevant to the outside world. Because for those at the levers of power, Israel has always been acceptable. The hate rhetoric against the Jewish state was only ever intended for the street, for the masses in the Arab states, because they needed a scapegoat for their own military failures. The rulers themselves never believed this



## The dilemma of Arab governments with Israel's military strength

rhetoric – which they used themselves. They have known since 1967 where the only functioning and strongest army in the region is located. The only difference between then and now is that they are grateful because the Israeli army also protects them from their arch-enemy, the radical Islamic Iran, which is hostile to them.

Mohamed Diwan is an Arab political analyst